

CAPITOL STUFF

By TED LEWIS

Washington, June 17.—When on a certain day the government of Red China knows more about a clandestine U.S. military operation abroad than our own State Department, it suggests, to put it mildly, that a most dangerous communications flaw exists in our national security operation.

The report that civilian American fliers were in combat in Africa against Congolese rebels came out of Peking Sunday. It was flatly denied by the State Department Monday. But on Tuesday the department reversed signals and said the Peking report was substantially true.

The explanation for this embarrassing switch only emphasizes the messed-up way the federal bureaucracy often operates. It appears the State Department, when first asked whether the Red China charge was true or false, queried a certain "channel" in the Central Intelligence Agency.

The presumably "solid" information came back from the hush-hush source, that no Americans were engaged in combat in the Congo.

The State Department decided to be even more careful. It asked for a recheck through the same CIA channel. The word came back that all that was known, or could be told, was that the hired American fliers were training Congo pilots to fly T-28 reconnaissance planes recently supplied to the hard-pressed government forces. The Americans might have participated in reconnaissance missions, but that was all.

But this wasn't all, as the State Department found out on Tuesday when it checked another division of the CIA. Peking was right. And today, of course, the State Department elaborated. Four American civilians participated in a "one-shot emergency mission" credited with saving Congolese forces from a disastrous rout by rebels in Kivu Province.

Passing the Buck to CIA Is Normal

Obviously, the CIA, now headed by the best administrator it ever had, John McCone, is considered by the State Department wholly responsible for that communications snafu.

This is normal operating procedure—pass the buck to the spy agency when caught with your own pants down.

We don't go entirely for State's explanation of how, by tapping the wrong CIA channel, it was made to look ridiculous. It is our guess that, despite all McCone has been able to do since he took charge at the CIA in October, 1961, some of his most capable agents would rather give State the wrong steer than the real McCoy.

There has been a constant clash between agency operatives and the department's boys. The latter think they should run all phases of our foreign policy maneuvers abroad and think the CIA is trying to take over the real trouble spots in a sneaky, clandestine sort of way.

The U.S. Embassy crowd in Saigon, for example, has always privately blamed the CIA for its mistakes in Vietnam, and vice versa.

The apparent ignorance of State on what was going on surreptitiously in the Congo is, incidentally, hard to believe.



John McCone
The CIA's best administrator

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The Secret U.S. Effort in the Congo

The CIA would certainly deny it, as it is required to, but as long ago as January, 1963, it was clear to most interested diplomatic sources here that were acting to bolster the Congo government's military power on a clandestine basis.

We recall that shortly after the return of the ransomed Bay of Pigs prisoners from Cuba, it was revealed by certain anti-Castro Cuban fliers in an interview here that a somewhat secret U.S. effort was underway in the Congo.

One of these fliers, who had been picked up at sea after the Bay of Pigs fiasco, was kept under wraps in a CIA hideout until the prisoners had been released.

He reported that some his fellow fliers had found jobs in the Congo, and he had a letter from one reporting that the same CIA agent who had been active in the training of invasion troops in Guatemala had turned up in Leopoldville.

One of these Bay of Pigs veterans, Manuel Penabaz, identified the CIA agent transferred to the Congo as Frank Bender. Another disagreed and said it was "Max," an agent with a German accent who specialized in psychiatric tests for the recruits training in Guatemala.

Mystery Man of the Bay of Pigs

Bender is a real mystery figure. He was a key operative in the training of exiles for the Bay of Pigs and, according to some of the prisoners released later, led them to believe that U.S. air support could be depended on if necessary to make the invasion successful.

In the early stages of the invasion plan Bender really had a cloak of secrecy wrapped around him. He told such exile leaders as Manuel Artime that he was not connected with the U.S. government in any way. He was only working for "a big and powerful company" willing to spend a lot of money to free Cuba from the communists.

That is the undercover way that a CIA agent likes to operate, and that the agency likes to have him operate. It is probably the sort of way that the operation in the Congo has been carried out.

If so, it would explain why the CIA is reluctant to tell the State Department what is happening, unless the squeeze is really put on.

And it should not be forgotten that American civilian fliers have been used before in just the combat way they were used in the Congo.

It is true that some of the fliers were killed in volunteer flights at the last stages of the Bay of Pigs invasion. But to this day this has not become official, even if the facts are known.